

6. A New Life in the Town

During much of the Middle Ages, as we have seen, European life was very orderly and predictable. Many thought that the arrangements between serfs and nobles would last forever. But there were also challenges to the great powers of the nobles. Serfs were unhappy and restless. As the Crusaders learned, there was another world outside the manor. Serfs now looked to the towns. In the thirteenth century, these towns became magnets for many serfs. Some serfs bought their freedom. Others simply ran away from the manor. All were looking for a new life.

Former serfs were attracted by the openness and variety of the jobs offered in the towns. However, the great differences between life on the manor and that in the town could be both exciting and terrifying.

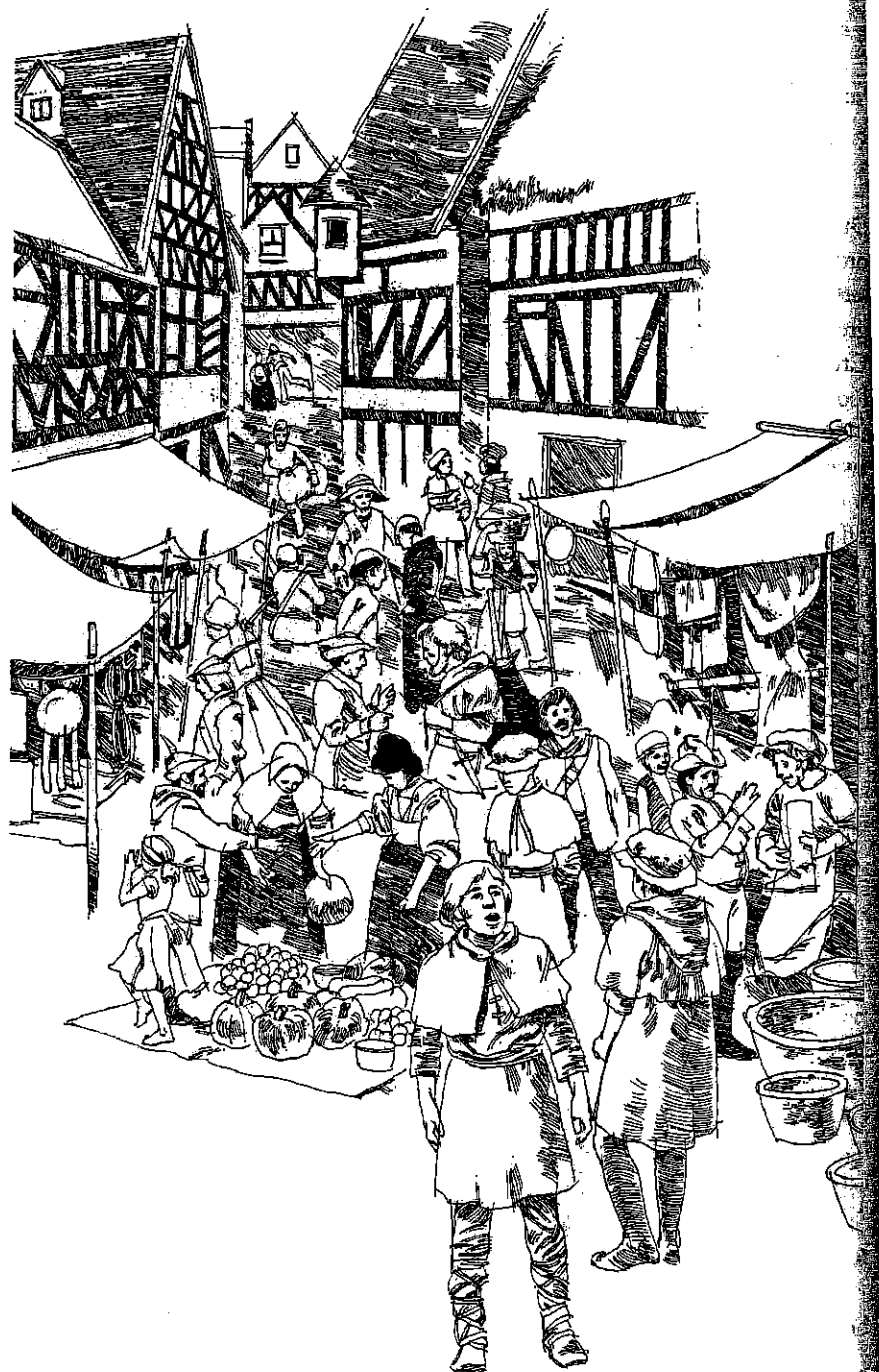
In this story, a serf who has bought his freedom faces the dangers and pleasures of the new life in any English town. Ask yourself whether he made the right decision in leaving the manor and going to the town. Would you have stayed in the town under the conditions he describes?

Leeds 1230

Has it only been seven days since I left the manor to come to Leeds? Everything seems such a blur. So much has happened in one short week. I paid the lord of the manor for my freedom, and I had such strange feelings. It was odd that he was happy to accept a little money from me after so many years of work and service. Perhaps he won't miss my crops and tax payments.

Night is falling. It is the worst time for me. I am afraid. The room is hot and stuffy. I feel as though I am choking. I'd like to go outside for a walk, but I don't dare to. People warned me that there are robbers hiding in the shadows. There is no one to protect me. I have no friends yet, and I can't afford to buy a weapon to protect myself.

I thank God when daylight comes. I like to walk through the crowded marketplace and watch the people working at their trades. I see them making helmets, saddles, coats of armor,



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spurs, and swords. Others are dyeing cloth or melting gold and silver and making cups and jewelry. There's a fair almost every day. People come from all over to buy these wonderful things. I have asked many people for a job. Today a cloth merchant told me to come back to his shop tomorrow. I hope he will take me on as an apprentice. Then he will teach me about the cloth trade. I will be part of his family and live in his house. I will be safe and have many new friends.

The manor was never this interesting, but I was safer there. Often, I long for the sights and smells of the land and the harvest. My home was small, but I never felt shut in. I miss my friends and relatives. How I wish I had someone to talk with!

Enough of this dreaming. I must stop thinking about days past. The way of life on the manor is dying; there's nothing there for me. This is where I am going to stay. There is excitement and liveliness here in Leeds that I never saw on the farm. There are thousands of people doing great things. There are people to meet and people to know. I will make friends with many of them; I will find a woman to love.

I am going to learn a trade and earn enough to live well. When I marry, I am not going to have to ask Lord Cecil for his approval. My children will be free. I am not afraid any longer. There is much more life than death here.

I will live and die a free man.

Postscript

Towns and cities grew up during the feudal period on easily defended heights, at road crossings, along rivers, or on national borders. At first, the feudal nobles owned and ruled the towns. But, over the years, the town merchants bought—and in some cases, fought for—their freedom. In England the kings won the support of towns against the nobles by giving the towns charters granting them limited self-government. By the end of the twelfth century, the towns of Europe were no longer controlled by feudal nobles.

During this time, more and more people were attracted to the towns. Before long, many towns had grown into good-sized cities. 1200 Paris had 100,000 people; by 1300 there were 150,000. In 1200 London had a

population of 20,000. There were more than 35,000 people by 1300. In 1300 Venice, Milan, Florence, and Siena each had 100,000 people.

Each city had many churches and often had a cathedral in the central area. A castle stood atop a hill or flanked a river. Thatched cottages and shops were crowded together. Streets were narrow, winding alleys. In a few cities, streets were paved with cobblestones. In most places, however, the streets were unpaved and unsafe for walking.

As you would guess, there were many fires, which often swept unchecked through a city or town. People fought the fires with buckets of water but they were seldom successful. They used long hooks to pull down a building if nearby houses were threatened.

People often kept small gardens alongside their houses. They also kept livestock. In London, pigs were supposed to be kept inside the house, but this law was not usually obeyed.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. Why were many serfs unhappy and restless?
2. Why were serfs attracted to the towns?
3. Why was night the worst time for the former serf in the story?
4. Why was the town an exciting place for a person from a manor?
5. Describe a typical English town of this period.